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RAISING THE BAR, BUILDING CAPACITY: DRIVING IMPROVEMENT IN CALIFORNIA'S CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOLS

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The California Alternative Education Research Project

This report summarizes findings and recommendations from a multi-year study of continuation high schools in California. It is the second in a series of reports from the on-going **California Alternative Education Research Project**, conducted jointly by the John W. Gardner Center at the Stanford University School of Education, and the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy at the University of California, Berkeley, School of Law.



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ABSTRACT

California's approximately 500 continuation high schools are estimated to serve more than 115,000 California high school students each year—a number that approaches almost 10 percent of all high school students and as many as one of every seven high school seniors. Continuation schools are, however, more racially and ethnically concentrated than the state's traditional comprehensive high schools. Hispanic students comprise 55 percent of all students in continuation schools, and although African American enrollments in continuation schools approximate those of comprehensive schools statewide, they tend to be overrepresented in many districts. California law contemplates more intensive services and accelerated credit accrual strategies so that students who are vulnerable to dropping out of school might have a renewed opportunity to graduate from high school with a regular diploma. Based on a statewide study of these schools, however, we conclude that, as a whole, they are failing to provide the academic and critical support services that students need to succeed.

This report comes at a watershed moment for American public education. At the federal level, policymakers are poised to reshape the federal school accountability system to promote universal college and career readiness through a new common core curricula and a renewed focus on the lowest performing schools. Likewise, here in California, legislators are considering sweeping changes to a broken school finance system and seek to recalibrate the school accountability system so that it creates stronger incentives for data-driven improvement across all schools. As well, the state legislature is considering almost 10 bills to address school discipline policies and practices that have tended to push low-income and minority students out of comprehensive schools and away from college and career-ready pathways. This ferment in public education presents both promise and peril for the alternative schools that are the subject of this report. The peril is that these schools and programs may remain an afterthought in the emerging curricular and accountability reforms. If so, our report offers a bleak prologue of what the

vast majority of these schools will continue to offer those youth who find themselves falling behind but struggling to stay engaged in pursuit of a high school diploma.

The promise, however, is that this moment presents a window of opportunity to fully incorporate continuation high schools, intended as second-chance pathways to the diploma, into the thinking, planning, and articulation of new accountability reforms and innovation. To this end, our report explores the role that the state, local districts and school leaders play in affecting school quality and student outcomes in continuation schools. Also examined are the roles of community nonprofit, and county or municipal social services, law enforcement, or juvenile justice agencies that come to play important roles in the lives of adolescents in these alternative schools. Our focus is on systemic issues (including relationships within schools and among districts and county authorities) and policy determinants of effective instruction (that is, how work and time are conceived and organized in schools). In earlier reports, our objective was to describe the schools and the challenges they face.¹ In this report, we focus on schools that are performing well under state and federal accountability systems and reflect on what these schools can tell us about promising policy and practice interventions. We tread cautiously here because for most students who are not on track to graduate due to poor grades or insufficient credits, alternative schools remain simply early exit ramps from school. But we have seen enough successful schools and students to report with confidence that despite disappointing overall results, continuation high schools *can* provide important opportunities and resources for a vulnerable population of youth. The “beating the odds” schools we examined also provide valuable lessons for policymakers and practitioners statewide.

1. Ruiz-de-Velasco, Jorge, et al., *“Alternative Education Options: A Descriptive Study of California Continuation High Schools,”* (Stanford University: Stanford, CA) 2008. Available at: gardnercenter.stanford.edu/current_initiatives/alt_ed.html.

BACKGROUND

This report draws on a two-phase study of continuation high schools in California. In Phase I, we reported results from field research undertaken during the winter and spring of 2007 in nine southern, central, and northern California counties.² Within these counties, researchers visited 26 school districts and 40 schools (including three sending schools and 37 continuation high schools) that differed in focus, student outcomes, size, and metropolitan status. In Phase II, researchers returned to three of the original nine counties (Santa Clara, Fresno, and San Diego) and visited 23 continuation high schools to explore more deeply the emerging “better practices” that characterize more successful schools.³

SUMMARY OF PHASE I FINDINGS: ACCOUNTABILITY ISSUES

The structure and universal application of both the Public School Accountability Act (PSAA) and the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE) leave no doubt that California intends to hold all students to the same academic standards for receipt of a standard high school diploma.⁴ Educators we interviewed almost unanimously embraced this single basic standard for the diploma as an important factor in improving the quality of instruction in continuation high schools in the last decade. Many principals noted, for example, that the enactment of the PSAA created pressure on districts to address the quality of curriculum in continuation schools. As well, principals and teachers often commented that the implementation of

the CAHSEE, though setting a minimal bar, did give students and teachers a concrete goal-post to structure and animate their efforts. Some principals also noted the benefits of No Child Left Behind’s (NCLB) increased focus on teacher preparation, pointing out that more of their teachers are now fully credentialed than in years prior to the NCLB law. The implementation of the Alternative School Accountability Model (ASAM) in 2001-2002 also enabled school leaders in continuation schools to document important academic “engagement” benchmarks, such as attendance or credit completion rates that are particularly important to track and improve upon when working with academically vulnerable students.

Nevertheless, our interviews with site leaders and teachers confirmed that at the *school* level, district and community members often continue to hold them to lower performance expectations. As a practical consequence of systematic neglect, continuation schools often operate within a weaker accountability system that contains fewer incentives for promoting student success than the accountability system as applied to comprehensive schools. In fact, our interviews with continuation school leaders largely confirm findings of a 2007 Legislative Analyst’s Office report (Warren, 2007), which found that conflicting rules about when and how to account for individual student progress often allow most continuation schools to escape accountability under the Federal NCLB and the State PSAA, and that application of those systems bear few discernible consequences for alternative schools.

Core content teachers (mathematics and language arts instructors) often expressed the sharpest critiques of the accountability system. These teachers largely embrace the state goal of delivering a curriculum that meets common state *content* standards for all students. They note however, that there are few state accountability levers or incentives for ensuring that districts will devote attention or resources to building the *instructional* capacity of continuation schools or of individual principals and teachers to deliver effectively on the standards. Thus, teachers in continuation schools reported that they are often left to their own devices to figure out *how* to improve and align their instructional efforts to the state standards. An important consequence is that, more than ever, student success turns on student access

2. Ruiz-de-Velasco, Jorge, et al., *Supra*. Counties in the study include Humboldt, Alameda, Santa Clara, San Joaquin, Fresno, San Bernardino, Riverside, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

3. In selecting Phase II schools, we over-sampled schools that were meeting or exceeding their federal AYP targets (adequate yearly progress), and further demonstrated strong attendance and California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) pass rates, and graduation rates. We also examined results from the California Healthy Kids Survey to select sites that received high scores on student and teacher satisfaction and school climate and safety variables.

4. We note, however, that while the state requires all students to complete a basic course of study (CA Education Code § 51225.3) and to demonstrate the same subject mastery (e.g., as measured by achievement on the California Standards Tests); some districts establish higher local standards for students in comprehensive schools, while maintaining lower credit accrual requirements for students in continuation or other alternative programs to qualify for a diploma.

to schools and teachers who have figured out, on their own, how to help over-aged and under-credited youth successfully master the common academic standards.

At the school level, principals and instructional leaders also struggle to navigate an accountability system that sends mixed messages. On one hand, the ASAM accountability measures clearly honor the demographic fact that continuation schools disproportionately enroll special needs students. Our prior reports, for example, document that continuation schools in California enroll English language learners, students in foster care, parenting students, and victims of violence or alcohol and drug abuse at rates significantly higher than comprehensive schools.⁵ Thus, the ASAM measures seek to promote a focus on key academic engagement and persistence measures that are pre-requisite to academic achievement. Nevertheless, as central as these measures are to their work, principals often expressed frustration that the ASAM academic engagement measures are not incorporated into school assessments of adequate yearly progress (AYP), and thus school leaders are not rewarded for making progress on these variables. Local educators also often observed that the lack of attention to capacity-building in the accountability design, assumes that the materials, curricula, and supports necessary for academic success in comprehensive schools are the same for continuation students and are readily available. As well, the existing system assumes that the teaching challenge is the same for educators in these schools. None of these assumptions are true. Few commercial textbook providers develop materials and textbooks for use in accelerating instruction with over-aged and under-credited youth. As well, teachers report that the instructional challenge and time needed to address students' academic needs in both the direct instruction and independent study modes are markedly different and greater in continuation settings than they are in typical comprehensive schools.

In sum, principals and teachers observed that the ambiguous state accountability system reflects a lack of

consensus among educators and policymakers about how to measure the effectiveness of schools that serve students who reach 10th grade substantially behind in credits, as well as about what ought to be the public's legitimate expectations of teacher and principal performance in this sub-sector of secondary schools.

In the next pages, we return to these major findings and draw on Phase II site visits, school and classroom observations, interviews and focus group data to assess how beating-the-odds schools have used strong site-based accountability routines to drive school improvement, build instructional capacity, and expand high quality educational opportunities for their students. We also move beyond a description of some of the locally-elaborated practices and policies, to suggest state and district policies that might elevate and scale the emerging "better practices" we are able to identify.

DRIVING IMPROVEMENT IN CONTINUATION SCHOOLS: LESSONS FROM EXEMPLARY SCHOOLS

THE STATE ROLE

1 | Clarify Goals for Alternative Education Options and Continuation High Schools

California's statutory and school accountability systems provide contradictory, confusing and inconsistent signals to districts and schools about expectations and academic goals for teachers and students in continuation schools. This concern with goal ambiguity was a consistent theme among continuation school leaders we interviewed and helps to account for a great deal of the variability in school quality and student experiences across schools. One overarching finding from our 2008 Phase I report on continuation schools was that there was enormous variability in the curricular offerings and quality of instruction across continuation schools - often even across continuation schools in the same school district. To some extent, variability is also evident across comprehensive high schools, but there are core curricular "input" features that are constant across the comprehensive schools. Most comprehensive high schools, for example, now offer access to a full set of course offerings consistent with the University of California and California State University

5. See, Ruiz de Velasco, Jorge & Milbrey McLaughlin, "Alternative Schools in California: Academic On-Ramps or Exit Ramps for Black, Latino, and Southeast Asian Boys?" in Edley and Ruiz de Velasco, Eds., *Changing Places: How Communities will Improve the Health of Boys of Color* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA) 2010. Available on-line at: www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780615347936.

“A-G” requirements, including courses in the performing arts and the sciences.⁶ Almost all comprehensive high schools offer some physical education or sports options. But these basic “input” features are found only sporadically across continuation high schools. Some continuation high schools offer physical education and sports, others do not. Some provide arts education, or access to a full A-G complement of course, but most do not.

What accounts for this deep variability in quality and performance across continuation high schools? One answer we found came in looking at schools with strong CAHSEE pass rates and steady progress in meeting federal AYP benchmarks. These strong performing continuation schools tend to look very much like each other in one important respect: they generally had a principal or district administrator who articulated a clear and consistently applied set of academic goals for continuation students and instructional delivery goals for teachers. They also set about creating a school culture that reinforced and advanced those achievement and instructional delivery goals. We learned from principals that it was critically important for them to set clear and consistent goals, precisely because they worked in a category of school for which the state provides contradictory and ambiguous goals. Nowhere is this more evident than in the multiple state statutes that authorize continuation schools.

One part of the California Education Code, for example, indicates a legislative intent that continuation schools should operate as a voluntary alternative for under-credited students to “complete the required academic courses of instruction to graduate from high school” in a setting “designed to meet the individual needs of each pupil.”⁷ Another part of the Education

6. To receive a high school diploma, students must fulfill state-mandated graduation course requirements: three years of English, two years of mathematics (including Algebra I), three years of social science (including U.S. history and geography; world history, culture, and geography; one semester of American government; and one semester of economics), two years of science (including biology and physical science), two years of physical education, and one year of foreign language or visual and performing arts. Beginning in the 2005–06 school year, students must pass the California High School Exit Examination to receive a high school diploma. See, California Education Code, § 51225.3.

7. See, California Education Code, § 48430.

Code, however, authorizes school districts to allow for the “involuntary” transfer of students to continuation high schools for behavioral reasons unrelated to academic performance.⁸ Indeed, this part of the Education Code provides that a comprehensive high school principal may make an involuntary transfer to a continuation school if he/she determines that “a pupil’s presence causes a danger to persons or property or threatens to disrupt the instructional process” at the sending school.⁹ Taken together, these two parts of the Education Code suggest that a continuation high school should provide a high quality alternative route to the diploma for struggling students, but it can also be a dumping ground for students deemed too disruptive for comprehensive schools. In fact, we saw many schools where both types of students were placed in the same classroom creating an untenable situation for teachers and principals trying to create a coherent set of student supports.

The policy of allowing districts to involuntarily transfer disruptive students to continuation settings also creates the temptation for districts that lack a full array of alternative options to place students into settings that are not equipped to meet their academic or support needs. Unlike county or community day schools, which are intentionally designed to meet the needs of students with behavioral challenges, continuation schools often lack the social emotional or psychological supports or interventions needed by behaviorally challenged students.

Another glaring inconsistency in the Education Code is found in provisions that preceded enactment of the PSAA in 1999 and reinforce an “occupational readiness” goal for continuation students. Section 48430 of the Education Code provides that districts should provide “a program of instruction which emphasizes an occupational orientation or a work-study schedule.” Following on this design, continuation schools are also reimbursed for an abbreviated 15 hours of instruction per student in a week (about a three-period day). This would be consistent with an assumption that the typical continuation student is working part-time, or needs a schedule that would facilitate finding a job. However, continuation school counselors and principals in

8. See, California Education Code, § 48432.5.

9. *Ibid.*

schools we visited consistently reported that very few of their students are actually working or looking for part-time work. Indeed, there was a common recognition among educators that despite the shortened day in continuation schools, there are very few jobs in the modern economy for 16-19 years olds who lack a high school diploma. Moreover, few continuation schools in our Phase I study had staff trained to deliver occupational counseling or instruction. Likewise, few continuation school students in our Phase I study were given access or transportation support to attend programs at Regional Occupation Centers.¹⁰

In a larger sense, staff in continuation schools often pointed out that the “occupational” emphasis in the Education Code implies a lower academic standard for continuation students, which is demonstrably at odds with the more recent demands of both the California PSAA and the Federal NCLB law. Both of these superseding laws make clear that the state’s performance goal for all students – including those in continuation settings – is that they should graduate with a diploma that is based on rigorous academic standards and indicates career readiness and preparation for continuing post-secondary education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clarify academic goals. If the standards of the PSAA are to be maintained and uniformly applied to all students, occupational or career training in continuation schools should prepare student to meet the academic standards of the mandated common core curricula.

Limit involuntary transfer to county day or community day schools or to other appropriate in-school programs specifically resourced to support students with behavioral challenges. Involuntary transfers to continuation schools are inconsistent with the primary goal of serving as a programmatic alternative for over-aged and under-credited youth whose principal challenges are academic, not behavioral.

10. In contrast to the typical school in our Phase I study, the “model” or “beating-the-odds” schools in Phase II often were distinguished by their efforts to provide *extended* learning time opportunities to students. See Section 3, *infra*.

2 | Provide More Substantive and Consistent Guidance About How State and Federal Standards are to Be Applied and Measured in Continuation Schools

Alternative schools are held to a set of standards that are substantially different from those of comprehensive schools. As described to us by school leaders and teachers, this dichotomous accountability system results both from the unresolved tension created by dueling state and federal accountability rules, as well as from apparent “loopholes” created as different accountability systems are superimposed on schools for which they were not designed.¹¹ Conflicting rules either allow most continuation schools to escape any consequences under the Federal NCLB law and the state PSAA, or application of those systems create few discernible incentives for the continuous improvement of practice in alternative schools.

The Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) was created following the passage of the PSAA in 1999 to provide school level accountability for schools serving highly mobile and over-aged, under-credited youth. In many ways the ASAM represents an innovative step forward in accountability for alternative schools, and makes California unique among states in articulating such a targeted approach.¹² The ASAM was intended to work in tandem with the PSAA’s Academic Performance Index as a coordinated state accountability system for alternative schools. Under ASAM, alternative schools select to track three of 14 suggested indicators of student academic engagement (e.g., attendance rates or persistence rates) and academic completion (e.g; credit accrual, CAHSEE pass rates, or graduation) to supplement the academic content performance scores on the California Standards Tests (CTE) that are used to calculate a school-level Academic Performance Index (API) for all California schools.¹³

11. See discussion, *infra* at pp.14-16.

12. See, Almeida, Cecilia Le, and Adria Steinberg, “Reinventing Alternative Education: An Assessment of Current Policy and How to Improve It,” Jobs For The Future, Boston, Ma, 2009. Available online at: www.jff.org.

13. Alternative schools, including Continuation High Schools select from the following ASAM indicators: Behavior (including disciplinary referrals and suspensions); Attendance; Student academic persistence; writing achievement; reading achievement; math achievement; completion data (including grade promotions, course completion, or credit completion); high school graduation rates; or GED completion (including the California High School Proficiency Examination certificate).

In 2002, however, California was required to include continuation schools in the NCLB accountability system. In addition to participating in the ASAM and PSAA, continuation schools were also required to be evaluated against NCLB's AYP goals. As a result of these overlapping state and federal requirements, the intended integration between the PSAA and ASAM was never fully realized as state school officials focused on a decade-long struggle to negotiate and align the state and federal system for all schools. In the meantime, continuation schools have continued to track the ASAM progress goals, even though they receive no credit for moving these indicators in either the state API or the federal AYP calculations. Yet, continuation school leaders report that the ASAM goals reflect critical preconditions for student academic achievement and progress toward the high school degree. Higher performing schools use the ASAM measures to help the track and make concrete progress on important academic "engagement" benchmarks, such as attendance or credit completion rates that are particularly important to work with academically vulnerable populations. Leaders in these strong-performing schools suggest that more continuation schools would be spurred to focus on continuous improvement if the ASAM was strengthened and included as a meaningful part of the incentives and accountability system for alternative schools.

Notably, school leaders in high-performing schools report that they seek support and accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). The WASC standards focus on the organizational effectiveness of schools, as well as on leadership and faculty academic service delivery standards.¹⁴ Leaders in the higher performing alternative schools reported that engagement in the WASC process helps them to strengthen accountability by assisting the entire school staff to engage in the instructional capacity-building tasks that produce better student results on the ASAM, PSAA and NCLB standards. The experience of principals in these schools suggests that an ideal accountability system would incorporate school service delivery standards

with indicators of student engagement and academic performance.

According to teachers in continuation schools, it also bears emphasizing that continuation schools are by design populated by highly mobile, academically vulnerable, over-aged and under-credited youth. As a group, continuation students are often performing in the bottom quartile relative to their peers in comprehensive schools and the federally-mandated accountability design does not take this type of school adequately into account. The federal AYP system rewards schools for moving as many students above an ambitious proficiency score in the state assessment system. But in continuation schools, almost all of the students may be far from the proficiency line and the core work of teachers is to help students make steady or "accelerated" progress. If that progress, however significant, is short of the proficiency line, teachers and school leaders will get no credit – and consequently have little incentive – to continue making steady academic progress with students. A typical example involves a school that is successful at helping a 17 year-old student advance from a 4th grade to a 7th grade literacy level – a significant growth trajectory in a condensed time period. The school in this example will receive no credit for work with this student in an accountability system that rewards schools only for getting students to the proficiency level tied to their formal grade in school.

Other features of the dominant federal accountability system also are somewhat irrelevant to continuation high schools. Only schools that receive federal Title I Basic Grants are placed into the federal intervention called Program Improvement. But according to an EdSource analysis, only about half of California's continuation schools receive Title I Basic Grants and thus subject to the benefits and sanctions of Program Improvement under NCLB.¹⁵ As well, to be held accountable under NCLB a school must also have a "statistically meaningful" number of tests from students who have been in the school from early October through the spring testing period - a threshold many continuation schools do not meet because of high student mobility.

14. WASC accreditation focuses on factors that impact institutional effectiveness (e.g., governance, curriculum and instructional strategies and assessment) as well as professional development, support services, and parent/community engagement.

15. "California's Continuation Schools," an EdSource Research Summary, (EdSource, Palo Alto, May 2008) at p.4. Available at www.edsource.org.

Failing continuation schools also face few systemic consequences under the state system alone. As a result, neither the state nor federal accountability systems create consistent incentives for continuation educators. And the system with the most potential to incentivize performance – the ASAM – does not count in the dominant accountability system. Thus, even schools that are making great strides in helping students pass the CAHSEE, and make continued academic progress with the most challenging students, will yet remain vulnerable to being labeled failing or substandard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Hold continuation high schools accountable for results by strengthening the ASAM and providing clearer guidelines about how it fits or might be better integrated into the regulatory scheme of the AYP and API student performance standards applicable to all schools. Make a strengthened ASAM more relevant by incorporating it into a school level API specifically designed for alternative schools. “Alternatively, any revised state accountability system should integrate relevant ASAM measures.”

Reward continuous student proficiency-based growth at the school level. (Proposed changes in the federal AYP calculation system to this end may help if adopted.) Special guidance may be necessary to help local schools define appropriate growth measures and benchmarks for over-aged and under-credited youth, while allowing schools flexibility in how they meet those goals.

3 | Support Accountability and Build Capacity for Results by Providing Extended Learning Time (A Regular Or Expanded Day) For Students in Continuation Schools

The higher-achieving continuation schools we visited made intentional efforts to expand the school- and community-based learning time available to students.

Principals in these schools said that it would be near impossible to help students meet the more rigorous performance and credit accrual standards imposed on all students by the state PSAA and federal NCLB within the 15 hours per-week reimbursement limit imposed on continuation schools. Moreover, the logic for an abbreviated school day appears clearly anachronistic as few students in the continuation schools we visited held, or were actively seeking, part-time employment.

High-performing schools employed a range of strategies to expand learning time, depending on the availability of resources and teacher contract flexibility. Some were supported to run a regular school day, with the district supplementing the costs above the state reimbursement amount from local sources. Other schools had large enough enrollments to operate two continuation school “sessions” back-to-back, and allowed students to attend classes across the two sessions flexibly as needed. Other schools partnered with other non-profit, or public agencies, including community colleges, county or municipal health, or justice agencies to offer supplemental services and classes that extended learning opportunities. Still other schools co-located an independent study program on the campus, or provided transportation to a Regional Occupation Program (ROP) that enabled extended learning opportunities, or they incorporated new computer-assisted technologies to offer anywhere-anytime learning.

Taken together, these strategies employed by the higher-performing schools comprise a patchwork of creative work-arounds to the highly restricted state funding available for continuation schools. As well, and while clearly providing important expanded learning opportunities, they did tend to exacerbate inequality *across* schools, as both the quality and range of learning time and opportunities was determined solely by the accident of local resource availability and the self-determined level of effort at individual sites.

High-performing sites allocated their expanded time in different ways but generally focused on leveraging more time to build instructional capacity within the school. Specifically, these schools tended to do three things with additional time. First, principals used more time

to create opportunities for teachers to work together in teams to examine individual student performance data. This inquiry served to inform classroom instruction and individual interventions with students. Second, schools with a full day also tended to have and use more time for *direct instruction*¹⁶ of whole classes or groups of students. Direct instruction in groups allows teachers to develop ideas in a group setting, and to encourage students to engage in group or classroom discussions that develop language, communication, logical reasoning, or interpersonal behavioral skills. Teachers also report that direct instruction creates opportunities for students, who are socially isolated or disconnected from positive peer or adult influence, to learn and model the pro-social skills and interaction norms that they will encounter in post-secondary settings. Third, more time generally allowed continuation schools to incorporate a richer menu of curricular offerings and to offer important co-curricular supports in partnership with community organizations, public agencies, ROPs, local business, and community colleges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Provide all continuation students pursuing a regular diploma with the option of a state-supported full day of instruction.

Support school with best-practice guidance on how to use expanded learning time to build instructional capacity and expand learning opportunities through collaboration across education options (e.g., Regional Occupation Centers, Community Colleges and Adult Education).

16. For purposes of this report, direct instruction includes whole-class or group lecture style, as well as a teacher-guided group discussion of a reading, lesson, or case-study. The key component here is that in direct instruction a teacher guides a group of students through a complex problem or learning concept, and often breaks that learning concept down into simple steps for students to grapple with later on their own. A common example is group instruction focused on helping students to identify or solve a math problem using a formula. This method can be contrasted with independent study or group learning, where the instructional task is co-constructed by student peers without the guidance of a teacher.

SHARED RESPONSIBILITIES: THE STATE & DISTRICTS

4 | Advancing Effective Alternative Options Through Stronger Student Identification, Placement, and Assessment Standards and Practices Aligned to State and District Goals

State-level Considerations

California can play a central role in improving and defining the characteristics of alternative education programs through the establishment of more coherent student eligibility standards and procedures. Nineteen states, for example, restrict eligibility for alternative programs to students who meet certain behavioral or disciplinary criteria, regardless of academic status.¹⁷ Other states have broader eligibility criteria, but California is among only 10 states that provide separate legislatively mandated options for students with academic challenges and those with disciplinary problems or behavioral challenges. Indeed, the expressed intent of the legislation authorizing alternative education programs in California suggests that its broad goal is to create a rich set of options that constitute an effective continuum of care for all students who are at risk of dropping out of school.¹⁸ And, a goal for continuation high schools specifically, is to serve as the main alternative option for addressing the needs of under-credited students at risk of failing to graduate with a regular diploma.

Yet despite this goal, we found that identification and placement into continuation high schools is idiosyncratic across the state and often unmoored from consideration of student needs. Placement and intake practices vary greatly across districts, and often even across continuation schools in the same school district.

17. See, Almeida, Cecilia Le, and Adria Steinberg, "Reinventing Alternative Education," *Supra*, at p.7.

18. *Continuation High Schools*, for student are at least 16 years old and generally under-credited relative to their age cohort; *Community Day Schools*, for student in K-12 who have been expelled from comprehensive schools for disciplinary reasons or are on probation and referred from the juvenile justice system; and *Community Schools*, which serve the same students as community day schools but can also provide independent study. As well, the state provides for a network of *Regional Occupation Programs*, which provide career and technical education option and to which students may be assigned in lieu of continuing education. See, California Education Code Sec. 48432 and Sec. 52314.5 authorizing ROP enrollment for high school dropouts. Also see, *Alternative Education Options in California, a View from Counties and Districts*, McLaughlin, et al., March 2008.

Placement policies can range from open access for all students to formal criteria that specify eligibility to a targeted subset of high school students. A couple of examples from our study serve to illustrate the range of practices in California schools.

In one typical school, during a focus group session with students in one randomly selected English class, we learned that the students present fell into three broad categories. Two participants reported being in foster families and described having fallen behind because of interrupted schooling as they moved from school to school. Four other students were there having taken but failed to pass the CAHSEE and/or one or more core subjects needed for graduation. One girl, however, reported being involuntarily placed at the school for having been “too loud too often” with the staff at the comprehensive school. This girl further reported that she was not behind in credits and, while happy at the continuation high school, was frustrated with the level of academic rigor and lack of course options. One teacher at the same school later confirmed that the range of academic and social needs of students in her class was the single greatest challenge to providing effective instruction and supplemental supports. Staff at this school also reported that the sending school in their district was considered a hostile place for “out” gay youth who were sometimes encouraged to voluntarily transfer to the more protective environment of the continuation high school. In sum, this school, quite typical of continuation high schools we visited, enrolled students who were there for radically different, and in the case of the openly gay youths, patently inappropriate reasons.

We noted, likewise, in our Phase I study, that many of the continuation schools we visited reported enrolling no English Language Learners (ELL), a report that was often at odds with California Department of Education (CDE) data which indicate that as many as one-quarter to one-third of students in these schools were identified as ELL. We concluded that the placement process at many schools often failed to pass on important information about the students’ status to the receiving schools. This, combined with the fact that most of these older

youth were now orally proficient in conversational English, rendered the reading comprehension and other language development needs of older ELL students otherwise invisible.¹⁹

School leaders, classroom teachers, and students consistently report that clear and transparent student identification, placement, and intake processes are pivotal practices that can have enormous impact on the instructional capacity of the school, school climate, student performance, and community reputation of the school. School leaders do emphasize the need for local flexibility in student placement so that interventions can respond to the needs of students as they may differ across school and community contexts. They do acknowledge, however, a need for greater accountability for promoting an orderly and rational identification and placement system to insure that continuation schools are not treated as dumping grounds, but instead become legitimate alternative options where educators can build instructional capacity around the needs of a well-defined student population. Fortunately, the California State Board of Education is already authorized to “prescribe and enforce standards and regulations for the organization and administration of programs of guidance, placement and follow-up” for continuation schools.²⁰

Shared District and State Considerations

Principals in higher-performing continuation schools reported that support from the district office, tacit or explicit, was indispensable both to maintaining placement practices that supported effective instruction, as well as to promoting the collaborative relationships between sending and receiving schools that were needed to implement effective policies.

Our case study of identification and placement practices in the San Jose Unified School District illustrates what is possible when a district takes on the challenge of

19. See, Ruiz-de-Velasco, Jorge, et al, *“Alternative Education Options: A Descriptive Study of California Continuation High Schools,”* *supra, fn.1.*

20. See, California Education Code, § 48436.

providing consistent and coherent guidance to schools on student transfer decisions.²¹ As well, the case underscores the district role in proving a coherent continuum of placement options including in-school continuation “plus” programs, a stand-alone continuation school option, and community day programs, each specifically designed for a targeted set of students. In the San Jose case, placement into the in-house or stand-alone continuation programs follows a transparent student identification, placement, and intake protocol that is common across all the continuation programs in the district. District officials there credit these transparent selection processes with enabling teachers and school leaders to design a coherent set academic interventions and social supports tailored to the specific needs of students placed in continuation programs. They also credit these processes for promoting more consistently successful school graduation outcomes for enrolled students.

There were other examples. Most notable are districts where the sending and receiving schools use pre-placement counselor interviews and post-placement orientation sessions to assess both the academic “fit” of students for the alternative placement, as well the level of motivation that students possessed for taking on the challenge of accelerated instruction. Careful identification and placement practices also allow district offices and receiving schools to develop support services targeted to students’ specific needs. Districts with significant numbers of parenting teens, for example, were able to develop childcare or parent training programs that advanced the academic success of these students. Data-driven placement practices also help continuation schools to identify students whose special needs might otherwise be invisible to school staff, including students in foster care or who are experiencing personal or family substance abuse issues.

Nevertheless, transparent and supportive district involvement in identification and placement to continuation schools is the exception rather than the norm. What we find most often is that district offices

are only minimally involved in shaping or monitoring the day-to-day placement of students across schools. Typically, the district will set a cap on continuation school enrollment, and will establish rules for the involuntary placement of students (if that is permitted), but will not otherwise structure identification or placement of students. This often leaves placement into continuation schools (including the timing of placements) to be determined solely at the discretion of counselors and the principal at the sending school(s) subject only to enrollment caps. The degree to which continuation principals are involved in placement is most often determined by historical practice in the district, whether the receiving principal asserts placement limits, or whether the principal in the continuation setting is empowered by district administrators to negotiate placement decisions with sending school staff. The most disruptive, but common, situation we observed was the practice of permitting continuously open or “rolling” admission to the continuation school. In these schools, teachers frequently complained that it was impossible to plan for direct instruction because new students would appear in their classes every week or sometimes every day of the week.

Students also emphasized the negative effect of rolling placement practices. Students in high-performing schools were often very clear about how they came to be identified for placement into the school and often volunteered the precise number of credits they needed to gain to graduate with a diploma. These students were also more likely to report that their classrooms were orderly and “drama-free” and thus more conducive to learning. In other schools visited during Phase I of our study, students in low-performing schools were much more likely to be unable to be very precise about how or why they were identified for placement and students in the same focus groups often gave very divergent reasons for placement (e.g., academic, behavioral, and situational reasons). These students’ remarks suggested to us that the continuation school was used as a placeholder for a broad spectrum of students who were considered disruptive in their prior placements. In such cases the institutional needs of the sending school were allowed to take precedence over the individual academic and social needs of the students involved.

21. McLaughlin, Milbrey W. & Hoorig Santikian (2011). PLUS: San Jose’s Successful Alternative Education Option. John W. Gardner Center for Youth & Their Communities: Stanford University. Available at: gardnercenter.stanford.edu/our_work/alt-ed.html.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The State Board of Education should require districts to articulate a coherent set of identification, placement, and school intake procedures that are applicable to all alternative school options in the district, including continuation schools.

District and school-level student identification and placement policies should be written, transparent, and available to all students and parents and community stakeholders to promote greater parent understanding, school accountability, and community engagement.

5 | Address the Lack of Reliable Data on System Size, Characteristics and Performance of Alternative Schools, Including Continuation, District and County Community Day Schools

School administrators, educators, parents, and researchers face enormous challenges in accurately assessing the size, characteristics and performance of schools and individual students in the alternative school system. We elaborate on three critical areas where better data would advance school accountability and create the foundation for data-driven reform and improvement at all levels of the alternative system.²²

Sizing the System. Until about 2001 (prior to the implementation of the PSAA), the state collected relatively little information about alternative schools. In 2010, researchers at WestEd examined the California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS) and ASAM enrollment data and documented how difficult it continues to be to get a firm accounting of the scope and size of the continuation high school population. The CBEDS enrollment number is based upon an annual census of students conducted only once a year — on the first Wednesday in October. The ASAM, by contrast, collects enrollment at multiple points in the year to take into

consideration the high mobility and student turnover in continuation schools. The ASAM enrollment numbers for continuation schools are almost double the number reported in CBEDS. However, because only about 85% of alternative schools participate in ASAM, statewide enrollment in continuation schools must be statistically estimated. Getting an accurate account of the size of the system is critically important because, as the WestEd researchers have noted, the best current estimates are that as many as 14 percent of all California high school seniors may be in continuation schools – a fact that is currently obscured by the inadequacy of the state data system.

Data on school level performance. WestEd's 2008 effort to assess school level performance of continuation high schools for the California Alternative Education Research Project remains the most recent effort to take on this challenge. They examined performance data from the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) system research files, which provide annual test score data, and which form the foundation for the school level API. They also examined the CAHSEE student-level research files. They found that fewer than three-quarters (72%) of California's continuation schools meet minimum student enrollment thresholds for receiving API scores (CST scores are counted only if 11 valid tests are received for students enrolled continuously since the October census date). Further, since meeting this enrollment threshold changes from year to year, the WestEd researchers were able to find only 229 continuation schools in the STAR system that meet enrollment thresholds for receiving an API score for three years consecutively. This was less than one-half of the total 519 continuation schools statewide. Based on an analysis of these remaining 229 schools, WestEd found 23 schools (or roughly 10% of the sample) that could be characterized as “beating the odds” by performing better than expected, on state and federal accountability systems, given the demographic characteristics of students enrolled. But the data do not allow us to thoroughly examine why some schools do better than others and to determine whether the 10% figure for “beating the odds schools” is high or low. No student performance trend data can be developed for the other half of continuation schools.

22. Greg Austin, Don Dixon, Jerry Bailey, and BethAnn Berliner, “Continuation High Schools and Their Students: what the Data tells Us,” (WestEd, Draft Report submitted to the James Irvine Foundation, September 2, 2008). Available at: gardnercenter.stanford.edu/current_initiatives/alt_ed.html.

A significantly higher proportion of continuation schools do receive public CAHSEE performance reports than receive API scores, making the CAHSEE a more universally available measure of continuation school performance. In examining these data, WestEd found that “continuation schools do as well or in some cases better than traditional schools” in helping 11th and 12th graders pass the CAHSEE.²³ But this fact, and its potential policy implications, are both obscured by the way that these CAHSEE data are typically reported to schools and districts.

Principals we interviewed most often cited their progress with student retention, attendance, and graduation rates as a critical marker of school-level success. These indicators are particularly important given the central role that continuation schools play in both reducing district high school dropout rates, and in re-enrolling students that have previously dropped out. But researchers have noted that this measure is not calculated by all continuation schools, or is calculated inconsistently (or with unreliable methods) across schools. New federal guidelines for the consistent measurement of high school graduation rates may help to promote more consistent and reliable information. However, there remains some concern that the federal rules do not adequately take into consideration the needs of alternative schools whose students are predominantly over-aged and under-credited. This is so particularly if California adopts – or is compelled by federal rules to use – a four-year graduation rate as the standard for all schools. A five or six-year graduation rate would better reflect the work that continuation schools are challenged to accomplish with over-aged and under-credited youth.

As noted previously, higher performing schools tended to drive school improvement by participating in the WASC accreditation process. Principals and staff in these schools reported that the WASC accreditation process offered them the opportunity to engage in very useful learning sessions with the WASC visiting team. This engagement with the WASC teams focused on instructional delivery standards, including professional development practices, and the use of student performance data by teachers to continuously improve instruction. In light of this trend, CDE should retain

WASC participation as a quality indicator in its Model School identification process and otherwise create incentives for continuation school participation in such a certification process. In fact, most traditional comprehensive high schools do routinely engage in WASC accreditation as a condition for their course offerings to be accepted for credit by the University of California and California State University systems.

Finally, we found that school climate variables (e.g., whether students experience their schools as safe and their teachers as generally supportive and caring) play important roles in promoting school-level performance. Likewise, school faculty frequently report that information on home, community, and social contexts in which their students live, helps teachers and principals to shape effective academic and social supports. On both of these counts, we found that the *California Healthy Kids Survey* (CHKS) and the *California School Climate Survey* (CSCS) provide actionable information. These data sources reveal, for example, that continuation students are disproportionately male, more involved in substance abuse and violence, and more likely to be living in formal or informal foster care arrangements or in group homes than their peers in comprehensive schools. They are also more vulnerable; they are more likely to be living with parents who are themselves substance abusers or violent, to be otherwise victimized, and to have poorer physical and mental health.²⁴ Yet, information from these data sources is rarely analyzed by school officials and rarely, if ever, made available to educators – at any level of the system – who might be able to use it to shape policy, design interventions and shape academic and social supports for students vulnerable to dropping out of school. This neglect of the available data persists despite evidence that those continuation schools with higher API scores also tend to be the ones that have made intentional efforts to create safe, supportive, caring, and engaging school environments. Indeed, our colleagues at WestEd have found, based on an analysis of CHKS and CSCS data, that these school climate factors “appear to make more of a difference in determining how well continuation schools perform than student demographics or staffing resources as measured by CBEDS.”²⁵

23. Austin, Greg, *et. al.*, at p.16.

24. Austin, *et al.*

25. Austin, *et al.*, at p.18.

Student-Level Performance Data. Collecting and tracking student level performance data over time (longitudinally) and linking those data to school outcomes, such as graduation rates, is an important linchpin in a strong accountability system. Such data are also central to school level efforts to improve instruction and to tailor supports to individuals and to discrete groups of students (as defined by a program’s student identification and placement practices). As well, longitudinal data systems are critical for helping policymakers to assess the relationship between school or district resource use decisions and student performance and can help policymakers determine which programs and practices are associated with gains in achievement. Over the last three years, California has improved its ability to track individual student performance through the STAR data system and, more importantly, through the development of the emerging California Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), which promises to enable longitudinal analysis of student performance at the individual and student levels. However, the full implementation of CALPADS envisioned in the enabling legislation has been circumscribed or delayed by both the Schwarzenegger and Brown administrations. Meanwhile, the districts also collect a great deal of valuable information, relevant to alternative education, through the School Accountability Report Cards (SARC).²⁶ But creation of a stable and sustained data system that might inform progress and change remains elusive. Moreover, our study underscores the state’s failure to build the capacity of all stakeholders (administrators, principals and teachers) to use what data we do collect to inform change.

More troubling, perhaps, is the fact that there is no system – current or planned – that would track individual student performance *before* and *after* students are placed in an alternative program or school (including continuation high schools) to determine how the alternative intervention is working or might be changed. Full implementation of CALPADS and concurrent analysis of the new longitudinal data by the Educations Options

26. The California Education code requires each school to develop a School Accountability Report Card (SARC). These reports include such additional data as the number of students who complete the UC/CSU A-G requirements, the school drop-out rates, the number of the school’s credentialed teachers, the school suspension and expulsion rates, and other information. Although this information is reported to the state, it has not been made part of a longitudinal data collection and analysis system.

division of the CDE, or by district administrators, might help to promote greater parent and community engagement in alternative education and promote “bottom-up” accountably for improving the performance of schools and individual students in the system. Some local districts have begun to assess the feasibility of developing data systems that allow them to track their students into post-secondary education, especially into local community colleges. Greater performance data availability and transparency could also help to spur public support for effective practices. Educators in our “beating the odds” schools often lament that their progress and success with vulnerable students is too often invisible to public stakeholders hungry for examples of effective interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen the ASAM data collection and analysis system by including all alternative option programs for purposes of collecting accurate student enrollment, mobility, student demographic and educational characteristics. Alternatively, any new comprehensive school accountability system should fully incorporate student and school progress measures (e.g., academic achievement and engagement measures) that would help to promote continuous improvement in alternative education.

Invest in a fully functional CALPADS to strengthen district and school-level educators’ ability to assess school, program, and student level performance over time. Our study indicates that this measure would greatly strengthen both state and local accountability and create greater opportunity for continuous improvement of instructional interventions and social supports in alternative schools.

Use a 5 or 6-year graduation rate as a standard accountability measure for students who complete their education in a continuation high school. Require all continuation schools that award regular diplomas to calculate attendance, persistence, credit accumulation and graduation rates consistently across schools and districts.

RECOMMENDATIONS (continued)

Districts should make better, more systematic use of data from the CHKS and CSCS to generate usable information, for school leaders and the public, of school climate variables that have been found to be important drivers of school and student success.

6 | Support, Evaluate and Provide Incentives for Instructional Innovation in Alternative Schools

California's system of state-mandated stand-alone continuation schools is unique in the United States and so there are few models for promoting large-scale systemic improvement in such a network of schools specifically for over-aged and under-credited youth. As well, the imperative to accelerate credit accumulation and to raise instructional standards in these schools is relatively new. Prior to 2000, there was little pressure on continuation schools to hold their students to college-ready standards for performance in the core math and language arts subject areas. In this context, the most successful continuation schools are focused on innovating and adapting instructional techniques developed by successful charter schools and by traditional schools that serve academically vulnerable youth.

In 2007, for example, the CDE began to promote the Diploma Plus model in California alternative schools. Originally developed in Massachusetts, the Diploma Plus model focuses on providing accelerated learning for under-credited youth through "performance-based" credit accumulation, a state standards-aligned academic curriculum, valuable life skills and work experience, as well as college credits that can be applied to a future college degree.²⁷ Although the CDE discontinued funding the development of Diploma Plus schools in 2008 because of budget constraints, most of the continuation schools we visited were adopting various forms

of "performance-based" credit accumulation models²⁸ to accelerate students' progress toward regular high school diplomas. According to principals and teachers these strategies do help to accelerate credit accumulation for students who would otherwise be forced to leave high school without a diploma in a traditional school. However, there has been no research to determine whether the quality of instruction, content and skill mastery is comparable to standards-based instruction in traditional comprehensive schools.

Other innovations we found in continuation settings included the development of early warning systems for informing students of their progress toward the diploma, new supports during the summer or first semester of enrollment; sector-based education and training programs (e.g., an on-site culinary training program) or on-site child-care programs that include services and training for both parenting mothers and fathers enrolled in continuation schools. Some schools were experimenting with blended high school/postsecondary designs, drawing from resources and expertise of community agencies, public welfare systems, and community colleges. We found these to be the most impressive – and often got youth to think for the first time that they might go to college. But these innovations were the exception. Those schools that were pursuing promising innovations were doing so in isolation, with little systemic support (or evaluation and documentation) from the CDE or other external providers that might help to document their efforts and inform their improvement or advance their adoption at other schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fund targeted supports and rewards for instructional innovation in continuation schools and promote accountability for results by funding rigorous evaluation of innovative practices. In this regard, the federal Invest in Innovation program might serve as a model for the state.

27. The Merlo Academy in Stockton is one of the original Diploma Plus Continuation schools opened in California with support from the CDE and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This school was not part of our study.

28. Performance-based approaches (sometimes called competency-based, proficiency-based, or standards-based credit accumulation) enable students to obtain credits based upon mastery of clearly identified content and competencies. Students are assessed for mastery of the state standards immediately after they complete a determined set of assignments, rather than based upon time on task, course completion, or grade level.

THE DISTRICT ROLE

Research now amply confirms the central importance of the school district office in promoting school improvement and innovation across schools. As well, it is often only at the district level that equity issues can be addressed. Most notably, the district office is uniquely positioned to create the systems, incentives, and conditions necessary for schools to attract well-qualified principals and teachers. They can also allocate funds or staffing resources to match the circumstances of schools that have the greatest needs and may be the hardest to staff. In this section, we draw on our site visits to higher-performing continuation schools and on our interviews with school leaders for information about how district leadership contributes to their relative success.

7 | Meeting the Demand for Effective Alternative Education Options

District administrators, school leaders and counselors almost uniformly reported that they could place more students in alternative programs and schools than there were seats available. This assessment does not even consider the potential demand for re-enrollment of high school dropouts if there existed capacity and good options for the recapture of dropouts. Clearly, the demand or need for effective alternative options exceeds supply. In some school districts, administrators estimated that they could place at least twice as many students in alternative options if they were available. This was so even in school districts like San Jose Unified, which has made a concerted effort to assess and meet student demand for alternatives to the traditional comprehensive high school program. Two issues arise with respect to demand. One concerns the lack of appropriate alternative options for students in some districts. The second issue is simply about the dearth of available seats in continuation schools, particularly in rural settings.

Many of the districts we visited, and especially smaller districts, operated “continuation” schools that also accepted involuntary placement of expelled or juvenile justice system-involved students. As noted earlier, these dual-purpose schools typically were the least successful in our sample. The reasons usually offered by school administrators for concurrent enrollment of voluntary

and involuntarily placed students were threefold. Most often, school administrators had not been asked this question before and confessed that they did not know why this practice existed, other than it was “just the way we have always done things here.” A second frequently cited reason was that much thought and debate had in fact been devoted to the question of “supply” but that budget constraints continued to limit the options available. In a few cases, district administrators reported that they distrusted the quality of county-provided options, and preferred to assign most expelled students to an in-district continuation program, rather than to a county-run community day school. As one district administrator explained, a county placement was an option of last resort because students transferred to county programs “almost never come back.” He suggested that students placed in county programs tended to wind up incarcerated or otherwise dropping out of school. In all cases, the results were the same: student placement decisions were highly constrained by both the quality of available options, and by the lack of a full continuum of options for students with divergent academic, behavioral and situational needs.

A related demand issue involves the lack of effective alternative options for over-aged and under-credited youth. Here we cannot conclude that a stand-alone continuation school setting is always the best option for students who have fallen seriously behind in credits. As the San Jose approach amply demonstrates, many credit-deficient students can be effectively served by stand-alone programs co-located in comprehensive schools that are specifically designed to accelerate credit accrual in the common academic core needed to graduate with a regular diploma. What is clear is that the number of California students in this category is not inconsiderable and remains underserved. California’s school drop-out rate continues to hover around 30 percent and a recent study by researchers at Stanford concluded that most students who drop out do so after first falling behind in credits.²⁹ As well, our study indicates that as many as one-quarter of continuation students in study sample are classified as English learners and merit further analysis for targeted intervention.

29. Reardon, Sean F., Nicole Arshan, Allison Atteberry, and Michal Kurlaender, (April 2010). *Effects of Failing a High School Exit Exam on Course Taking, Achievement, Persistence, and Graduation*, 32 Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, No. 4, pp. 498-520.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Districts should assess student performance data to track the number and characteristics of students who have become over-aged and under-credited as well as to assess when in the school trajectory most students begin to fall behind and for what reasons. These data would allow the state and district to better assess the need for alternative options and targeted interventions for these youth.

8 | Addressing the Unique Professional Development Needs of Continuation School Leaders and Educators

As a general matter, the relevant research supports the proposition that school principals, who are charged with directing and sustaining improvements, need professional development that helps them understand and develop effective leadership skills. Teachers also are challenged to embrace school change; to work with their principal to develop a cohesive vision of reform throughout the school; and to foster distributed leadership (accountability) within the school. As noted in previous reports, shaping and leading principal and teacher professional development is a job that falls on district shoulders in California as California lags other states in implementing state-led educator professional development.³⁰

School leaders and teachers in our study, however, often reported feeling professionally isolated in their continuation schools and excluded from reform initiatives and improvement programs and resources made available to comprehensive high school staff. Even in high-performing schools, teachers especially reported that they were not included in professional development opportunities available to teachers in comprehensive

schools or that those opportunities were not relevant to the unique facets of their work with abused or otherwise vulnerable youth that may require special staff training or skills. Principals and teachers also commented that appropriate staff development programs targeted to the needs of educators who work with vulnerable youth are difficult to find.

Principals most often mentioned needing training in how to align performance-based credit accrual programs with state standards as well as in how to effectively organize the day and year to promote effective teacher practice and student persistence. Principals in high-performing continuation schools reported struggling to find ways to use student performance data effectively to inform teacher practice and to identify sub-groups of students who might benefit from specific interventions. In describing the process of developing a supportive, quality program at their schools, almost all high-performing continuation high school principals emphasized that they were offered no roadmap or professional training to inform their efforts. Nearly all described a process of experimental implementation over a long period of time, guided and driven by their own instincts and positive goals for their students. An important take-away for us is that many continuation school principals see themselves as pioneers, with few external models to guide critical aspects of their school design and reform.

Teachers, particularly new teachers, most often mentioned the need for skill development in identifying early warning signs of student disengagement: working with diverse learners, defusing behavioral disruption, and mastering classroom organization and management practices specific to their instructional environments. One area that merits further inquiry, and that came up often in teacher interviews, was that building trust with students was a central task for teachers in continuation schools. Many teachers commented that this skill set was one that their colleagues either need to bring to the table or needed to learn to be successful. They explained that many students come to continuation settings after experiencing unfair or disrespectful treatment in their prior settings. Rebuilding trust with these students was important for ensuring school discipline. But more importantly, students who trusted and felt supported by the adults in the school felt safe to have

30. See, Darling-Hammond, Linda & Stelios Orphanos, 2007. "Leadership Development in California," a report of the Getting Down to Facts Project, Stanford University, available at irepp.stanford.edu/projects/cafinance-studies.htm; also see, Loeb, Susanna & Luke Miller, 2007. A Review of State Teacher Policies: What are they? What are their effects, and what are their implications for School Finance?," a report of the Getting down to Facts Project, Stanford University, available at irepp.stanford.edu/projects/cafinance-studies.htm.

honest discussions about their academic weaknesses, and to experiment with new approaches to learning independently and in teams. Here again, teachers reported that they were on their own to recognize and develop skills, such as trust-building, that were critical to their effectiveness. In the absence of a professional learning community, teachers and principals were left to resort to the vicissitudes of school-level experimentation and a trial-and-error approach to instructional change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School districts should support continuation school leaders and instructional staff with ongoing professional development opportunities that reflect the unique demands of alternative education.

Districts (and relevant labor organizations) should create incentives to attract highly-skilled principals and teachers to alternative schools.

As a more general matter, district leaders should include continuation high schools in system-wide efforts to spur innovation, adoption of best practices, and reform in secondary schools.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOL-LEVEL LEADERS

Our study of alternative schools in California has focused on learning about policy variables at the state, district, and community levels that mediate student outcomes in individual schools. We have not spent sufficient time in schools and classrooms to make informed recommendations about the detailed *instructional* aspects of school level change. Our data do, however, allow us to make observations about three sets of practices that seem to distinguish higher-performing continuation schools and that merit further study.

Promoting an asset-based, student-focused school climate. The higher-performing schools in our study excelled at motivating students to attend school regularly and in challenging them to take on ambitious academic goals. This is always a daunting task, but especially so when the

majority of continuation students are, by definition, low-performing and marginally connected to school when they first enroll. One key to understanding the success of high-performing schools can be found in WestEd's 2008 analysis of continuation student responses in the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS). The CHKS measures the extent to which students feel close to the people at their school, are happy to be there, see themselves as part of school life, have opportunities for meaningful participation, feel academically challenged, safe, and perceive that they are treated fairly by staff. These school climate factors are significant predictors of positive school-level outcomes. WestEd concluded, for example, that "those continuation high schools that are most likely to have higher API scores are those that are most likely to have created a safe, supportive, caring, and engaging environment that reduced student behavioral barriers to learning such as substance use, violence, and poor mental and physical health." And as previously noted, they found that these school-climate factors "appear to make more of a difference in determine how well continuation schools perform than student demographics or staffing resources as measured by CBEDS.³¹ These findings are consistent with results from our student focus groups and with other research in Chicago on reform in high-poverty schools.³²

During a focus group discussion at a San Diego county continuation high school, a student told us that at his previous high school, he had been "on weed" almost every day in class, but that no one ever noticed or inquired about his behavior until the day he was caught smoking on campus. This student also said that when he was taken to meet with the principal, the only conversation she wanted to have was about what alternative school he would be required to attend. Later in the focus group discussion the participating students were asked why they were experiencing success in their continuation school after being labeled "failures" in their sending school. The same student responded in simple terms: "This is the first place anyone ever bothered to ask *why* I was messing up."

31. Austin, *et al.*, *supra*.

32. Bryk, Anthony, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Lupescu, and John Q. Easton (2010). *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago).

The importance of key leaders' and teachers' beliefs and values is vital at higher-performing alternative schools. Principals in schools with evidence of exemplary student outcomes (particularly CAHSEE pass rates and credit-accumulation rates) were often emphatically positive about what they believed their students could accomplish and about the school's role in facilitating those outcomes. When experienced principals were clear and proactive about their beliefs, the faculty and students echoed their sentiments. Teachers whose principals articulated clear expectations about standards and student outcomes reported feeling empowered to try new strategies to engage and support their students and were often said they encouraged less-motivated colleagues to do the same.

Students are affected by the attitudes and beliefs of their teachers and school leaders. In focus groups students were unequivocal about the effect that teachers' positive attitudes and high expectations had on their motivation to engage and learn. Some of the black and Latino youths expressed genuine surprise at their own apparent transformation into "good students," since they had previously experienced only failure. Most students underscored the importance of the extra help and time they received to accomplish work in these settings. Most also emphasized that their teachers and the principal regarded them as "teachable" and having a positive future—and this belief in their potential and value made all the difference to students. These communicated beliefs about student "teachability" and promise take on heightened importance where accountability systems are not in place to ensure a basic minimum level of quality in critical aspects of school operations and instruction.

While some students come to school goal-oriented and ready to learn, others need educators to step in and build the trusting relationships and links to their lives that may engage them in school. Teachers at continuation high schools say that this is a central task for every teacher with every student. Indeed, some report that it may take weeks or months of intensive intervention by school staff before new students "buy in" and begin to really engage with the work. As one teacher said: "I think the number one thing that's really important is developing relationships with these kids and . . . [developing] trust. Because I think that when that happens,

there's a lot of acceptance . . . they're willing to buy in with you about where you're trying to take them."

School discipline policies at higher performing schools. School discipline policies in the high-performing alternative schools we visited were generally clear, structured and firm but more focused on positive behavioral support approaches³³ than on "zero-tolerance." Principals often described themselves as coaches (and many actually held coaching jobs previously). Consequently, these school leaders encourage faculty and students to conceive of themselves as members of a "team" or as part of a "family" with shared responsibility for maintaining academic focus and order in the school. In such settings students are encouraged to monitor their own behavior by understanding the implications of individual behavior to both group and individual success. In fact, many students and teachers in these schools commented that the school "felt like a family," where care and personal concern are modeled by the staff and where students are encouraged to care for and celebrate each other's social and academic development. More than one teacher commented that "these students don't get much support at home" and the school furnished the family-like encouragement fundamental to their success.

The continuation high schools we visited generally took a "restorative" rather than punitive stance to disciplinary issues – they sought to understand and respond consistently to the reasons underlying students' behaviors. These schools focus on direct instruction in positive behaviors, including self-discipline, problem-solving skills, and the development of nurturing relationships. Because many students tell teachers that they have experienced discipline in other schools (or in the hands of the police) as arbitrary and unjust, teachers and principals in these schools are explicit about establishing positive norms and clear expectations for behavior. Teachers enforce consistent disciplinary actions tied to the nature of any infraction. Some teachers offer students skills and strategies for appealing the

33. For a description of this general approach see, e.g., Sugai, George and Robert Horner, (2006). "A promising Approach for Expanding and Sustaining School Wide Positive Behavior Support, in *School Psychology Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 245-259 (2006). Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a supported strategy of the US Department of Education through the Technical Assistance Center on PBIS.

school's disciplinary rules and decisions in constructive and socially appropriate ways.

Many schools we visited are in communities where youth gang activities compete with families and schools to provide students with a sense of belonging. Teachers in high-performing schools did not describe formal "anti-gang" initiatives, but instead insisted that their own personal effort to gain the trust of students was their most effective strategy for reorienting gang-involved students. They made a point of asking students about what was going on in their home and personal lives, and tried to help them reflect on their context and challenges in ways that engendered trust in their teachers and school professionals. High-performing continuation schools report that students who formed positive relationships with their peers or with the adults in the school are less likely to engage in aggressive behavior in school or to maintain affiliations with gangs. Teachers and principals in high-performing schools note that developing student trust requires that students be given concrete opportunities to contribute in some positive way to the life of the school, their communities, or their peers. Many schools are therefore intentional about engaging students as peer counselors, creating peer discipline "courts," or by arranging for volunteer opportunities in the school and community, and recognizing them for their pro-social behaviors and contributions.

Blending academic supports with social supports and connections to community resources, businesses and post-secondary institutions. Social supports for vulnerable students are critical to student success and cannot be separated from efforts to accelerate academic learning. Schools we visited that had strong school-completion outcomes tended to move beyond core academic supports (for example, individual tutoring, which is at least formally a common feature of alternative schools) to social and emotional supports through psychological counseling and to adult-student interactions that communicated caring. Principals in these schools hired at least a part-time social worker as well as staff with vocational-education experience or credentials; principals also tended to instruct office clerks with bi-lingual or multi-lingual skills to focus on attendance issues and parent contact. Providing these additional supports is difficult for smaller schools because of their lean staffing structure, so they depend on developing relationships with

agencies and individual volunteers outside the system. These schools were also the most likely to obtain school volunteers with professional backgrounds in social services or to partner with social services agencies to offer on-site support to students.

Building college and career knowledge among students from low-income families is also key. Black and Latino boys especially have the lowest college-going rates among all racial and gender subgroups. For these students, intentional partnerships and pathways beyond the school are important. We found that leaders of particularly effective continuation high schools are purposeful about forming partnerships with external institutions including community colleges, regional occupational programs, and local employers. These partnerships provide students with postsecondary pathways to academic growth and self-sufficiency, along with the resources to help them get there. Interviews with teachers and counselors indicate that even those students who are motivated to stay in school are woefully misinformed about the academic and social preparation needed to navigate the transition to college and to succeed there.

Where we found strong continuation programs, we usually also found well-designed partnerships with local community colleges. Teachers and counselors in continuation schools worked with area community colleges to develop programs of study as well as opportunities for their students to visit the campus and sit in on classes. Advisers from community colleges visit the continuation high school to tell students about the local program and to explain opportunities for financial aid, admissions procedures, and academic prerequisites.

Several continuation school administrators actively cultivate relationships with local businesses to provide jobs for students as well as opportunities for credit-bearing internships. Others develop relationships with a number of community agencies that provide youth services and multiple opportunities for community service. Several continuation schools rely on relationships with county mental health agencies or community-based mental health programs to provide drug and alcohol treatment, and on partnerships with probation agencies to offer informational talks and collaborate on internships or job placements for students on probation.

In the schools we visited, these partnerships were of a distinctly local flavor, differed in form and intensity, but always added critical resources to support teachers and their students. Schools that were intentional about building these connections helped students to see the relationship among their education, opportunities in their local communities, and positive pathways. These connections helped students to re-imagine themselves, their potential, and their futures. Teachers and principals also reported that these connections helped to build public support and understanding in their communities about alternative schools and the students they serve. The benefits are especially important for black and Latino boys in communities with high gang activity rates, as contact with academically motivated students helps local merchants and businessmen see young men and boys of color in a positive light. Schools lacking these partnerships and connections are, by comparison, at a significant disadvantage in their efforts to meet students' needs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School leaders can increase their capacity to provide student support services by developing partnerships with community, higher education, business, and local social services organizations. District leaders also can play a supportive role by seeking these resources for alternative schools.

A NOTE ON THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS AND PHILANTHROPY

A major theme in our multi-year study of continuation schools has been about their essential invisibly within their communities and school districts. These schools and their students often sit outside of performance accountability systems that might otherwise direct greater attention to their needs and, in some instances, to their extraordinary success under especially challenging circumstances. The faculty in these schools often find themselves professionally isolated as well. Many principals and teachers we met expressed surprise

that researchers were interested in their schools. We also met principals and counselors in sending schools who routinely send students into alternative settings but confess to never having visited one. And, we have communicated with many colleagues in the research community who are knowledgeable about schools and school reform in California but had never heard of a continuation school or were unaware of the sheer scale of the alternative education sector in California.

Although many of the more effective continuation schools work collaboratively with public agencies (most notably health, human services, and public safety agencies) we know of no community-based, parent/student organizing, or faith-based groups that have made the large continuation school system a focus of their services or advocacy. In this context, it is difficult to see how school officials and policymakers will make this sector of schools a priority in the absence of sustained attention from these "grassroots" advocates. Yet, as we have noted, students in continuation schools are more likely to be racially or ethnically concentrated than those in the state's comprehensive high schools. Hispanic students especially tend to be over-represented, comprising well over half of all students in continuation schools. African-American and English learner groups also tend to be over-represented in the alternative schools of most districts.³⁴

It is also apparent to us that many of the resources so critical to success of continuation schools – academic supports, social-emotional supports, and links to job networks – must come from sources outside the school districts' direct control. Thus community-based organizations, business leaders, and faith-based partnerships might not only raise public awareness about these schools and students but can bring important human and social resources to bear on the goals schools and their students are pursuing. Our experience in other school sectors suggests that attention and active involvement from community-based organizations and from the local philanthropies that sit at the top of the non-profit sector could shed light on the system and spur both innovation and learning. Part of the research and development agenda for local and national education philanthropies should be dedicated to studying

34. Ruiz de Velasco, Jorge, et al., *supra*, fn.1, p.2.

successful strategies for addressing the needs of over-aged, under-credited youth and building the pool of potential partners for helping schools and districts provide nonacademic student supports. Likewise, involvement from trusted leaders in the non-profit sector could generate greater public will to provide effective second-chance alternative options for youth in California.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Our study of California’s continuation schools confirms that many of these alternative placements are, in fact, successful on-ramps for re-engaging youth back into school and onto a path to a high school diploma and, often, post-secondary education. All policymakers and school leaders can learn much from the experience of educators and students in these “beating the odds” schools. The exceptions remind us, however, that the

goal of proving effective second-chance programs for all vulnerable youth remains elusive. Instead, for too many youth, opportunities to connect with school, to imagine hopeful futures, and to set out on a positive pathway are lost when schools do not or cannot respond to their needs – and do not offer them a genuine alternative. Educators working in alternative programs suffer as well when county, municipal, or community-based youth services fail to support their efforts, when the resources offered to them are limited or of poor quality, and when they are afforded little professional respect.

Many vulnerable youth are caught in the middle, wanting a different course for themselves, but not finding the support that would enable them to change direction. Although we observed alternative programs across the state that do provide effective opportunities for this population, they were the exception. The exceptions remind us that we can do better.